

# NEEDS ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH IN JAPANESE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT: A PILOT STUDY

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## 1 . Introduction

### ***1.1 Background***

With globalization increasingly linking societies and economies, the importance of fostering globally minded and globally competent professionals<sup>1</sup> has been recognized as an urgent issue in the Japanese context (Council, 2011). The Japanese government, industry, and academia have been working towards the goal of cultivating globally minded professionals; however, a question arises concerning exactly what kind of people are considered to be globally minded or competent professionals.

A possible definition of a globally minded professional has been offered by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT). MEXT defines such professionals as individuals who possess: 1) Language proficiency and communication skills; 2) Initiative, activeness, a challenging spirit, cooperativeness, flexibility, responsibility, and a sense of mission; and 3) Understanding of different cultures while identifying as a Japanese person (MEXT, 2012). The concept of global-mindedness can be understood in many ways and, often, strong English skills are considered to be one element thereof.

First, in regard to language proficiency, it is widely regarded in Japanese society that students and workers must possess language skill, particularly in the English language.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the Japanese term for global human resources is translated as *globally minded professionals*.

This popular opinion was presented in the interim report published by the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization and Development (The Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2011). In fact, the belief that English is necessary is indeed dominant in the current climate. An increasing number of Japanese companies are recognizing that demand for English proficiency in the business community is high and are encouraging their employees to learn the English language so that they can use it successfully in their workplace. Some companies in Japan, such as Uniqlo, a popular apparel company, Rakuten, the largest e-commerce company in Japan, and Bridgestone, a leading tire manufacturer, have adopted English as their “in-house” official language.

Many Japanese companies, particularly those engaged in international business, require that their employees take the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), one of the most popular English-language tests. Some companies give preference to people with high TOEIC test scores when recruiting or promoting, while other companies set their own criteria. For example, in 2013, Takeda Pharmaceutical Company set a score of 730 or higher as minimum requirement for new university graduates to obtain a position in the company (*The Daily Yomiuri*, 2011).

Developments such as these have affected the focus that Japanese jobseekers place on acquiring language skills. Before discussing the emphasis placed on language proficiency in job applications, a description of the Japanese job-seeking process is required. This job-seeking process is considered to be rather unique. Once a year, Japanese companies recruit new graduates. They select fourth-year university students and make a provisional offer of employment to successful applicants. These students must begin working in April, immediately after they graduate from university in March. The job-hunting process is conducted as follows:

- Students attend seminars organized by companies and recruitment fairs organized by the recruitment industry.
- Students enter the selection stage, sending resumes, participating in interviews, and taking tests.
- Successful students receive a provisional offer of employment, usually in August.

### ***1.2. Purpose***

In light of such a process, and considering that many Japanese businesses undeniably recognize English as an important asset, a number of needs analyses have been conducted with business people at varying levels of both large and small businesses in order to ascertain the level of English required in actual working places. However, no research has been performed focusing on the job-seeking students themselves, exploring if they genuinely consider English to be necessary in order to acquire a job, and if so, to what extent.

This paper presents a pilot study exploring student experiences and reflections regarding job hunting. With this study, the researcher aims to assess the degree to which students regard English as necessary during the job-hunting process, and also to determine what students believe to be valued by their prospective employers. Using the contents of this needs analysis, the researcher hopes to begin to grasp the degree of English proficiency required for graduating students, with the intention of tailoring English education-related curriculum design at the tertiary level in Japan, to learner needs and objectives.

## **2 . Literature Review**

The Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC), which conducts TOEIC tests, issued a report in 2013 investigating TOEIC scores and their usage in 3,254 listed companies (IIBC, 2013). According to this investigation, in 75% of these companies, the English language is used and 50% make efforts to foster globally minded professionals; 80% of this 50% offer English language learning opportunities to foster these professionals. In all, 60% of the companies surveyed use the TOEIC scores of applicants as a reference when recruiting (IIBC, 2013).

A previous needs analysis research in this vein was conducted on a large scale with funding from government grants. Between 2004 and 2007, Koike (2010) and a group of researchers, conducted a quantitative survey of more than 7,000 Japanese business people with overseas work experience in order to determine the degree of English

language (EL) proficiency required to conduct business internationally. The survey, which was conducted in a Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research Project with the cooperation of the Institute for International Business Communication (IIBC), achieved results that suggested a direct correlation between high scores on the TOEIC and an ability to conduct international business negotiations effectively. The survey also revealed the current and desired level of EL proficiency in the Japanese business sector.

In terms of TOEIC scores, there was a gap between the actual scores and ideal scores of questionnaire respondents; for example, while almost 70% of respondents believe that a score greater than 800 is required for international business people, only 21.2% of respondents who had taken the TOEIC achieved a score higher than 850 (Koike, p. 39). These researchers recommended that schools should set target levels of EL proficiency for each grade, to ensure that students obtain the ability to communicate in a global economy. They also suggest the following: (1) policies should be enacted to increase Japanese students' EL proficiency both qualitatively and quantitatively; (2) foreign language education policy as a robust national strategy should be established and practical English language education applicable in the real world should be taught in universities, with a special focus on the development of debate and speech skills; (3) those active in international business should develop strong negotiation skills, not just proficiency in the language; and (4) that national policies prioritizing enhanced English proficiency should be enacted.

Following the study performed by Koike, Terauchi (2015) and a group of researchers conducted quantitative and qualitative surveys on business meetings conducted in English, a practice which often cause difficulties for Japanese businesses. Both surveys revealed that basic English skills, especially listening skills, are necessary. Terauchi and his group also presented some suggestions to compensate for a lack of English skills, such as using visual aids and understanding methods of conducting meetings that differ from the manner to which Japanese companies are accustomed.

In a smaller-scale study, Saito (2004) conducted a survey of 32 company workers through face-to-face interviews and via the Internet. The survey was based on the

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) concept and its purpose was to analyze business people's need for English in the workplace and to focus on the English required in the business field. Saito asked the study participants questions concerning the purpose of language use in their workplace. The results of the survey indicated that writing, negotiating, and oral presentations skills were most required in the workplace. Saito (2004) concluded that, although students in her college are likely to show the most interest in improving speaking skills, these are not the only skills needed to fulfill requirements for their future professional goals.

Like Saito's survey results, there have been cases in which differences occurred between what learners want to develop and what is actually required for their work. Morrow's (1995) investigation of Toshiba Corporation's EL training program found mismatches between the skills the learners wanted to learn and the skills they used most in the workplace. The majority of learners chose speaking as the skill they most wished to improve, but admitted that reading was the skill most used in the office. Morrow concluded that learners' needs are difficult to determine as they change with time and circumstances. However, as this study was performed twenty years ago, it cannot be assumed that such findings are still applicable. Considering Morrow's investigation, along with that of Robinson (1991), which highlighted that ESP courses are normally "based on a needs analysis, which aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English" (p. 3), a needs analysis for targeting learners in specific situations should be conducted.

### 3 . Data Collection Methods

The data collection methods that Hyland (2006) recommends for conducting a needs analysis in relation to ESP differ depending upon the type of information in question (p.277). For data collection for this needs analysis, as the information to obtain is based on people's experiences, questionnaires and interviews are considered effective means by which to approach this study. Huhta, Vogt, Johnson, and Tulkki (2013) explain that the advantage of surveys and interviews is that there is a lower

chance of bias, and a large amount of data can be collected at a time. A structured interview can be controllable but provides standardized data only, while an unstructured interview can advance to areas that the researcher has not planned for. Therefore, it can be considered that a semi-structured interview with some pre-planned questions would allow the interviewee to elaborate on their answers.

Such a combination of approaches, referred to as *triangulation*, is a manner by which to add “rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). For this study, using concepts of triangulation to focus on certain behaviors can afford a more in-depth understanding of students’ opinions. In commencing the needs analysis as a pilot study, for this paper a questionnaire and individual interviews conducted with students are analyzed. This research attempts to use students’ perceptions of, and reflections on, the value of English in job-hunting to assess the actual value of English for job applicants.

### ***3.1 Participants***

The target participants of this study were fourth-year students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who majored in English in a university in Japan. A total of 16 students answered the questionnaire and 4 of the 16 participated in the individual interviews. All of these participants had experienced the job-hunting process; beginning with filling in an entry sheet, taking a test (a practice of some companies), and two to five rounds of interviews, depending upon the company.

### ***3.2 Ethics***

Written consent to cooperate during this study was obtained from participants after the researcher explained how the research was to be conducted and how confidentiality of the participants would be protected. The main concern in conducting the current research was to maintain the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of the participants and their companies.

### ***3.3 Data Gathering***

In order to obtain the targeted data concerning the requisite English skills of

university job hunters, data was gathered through two methods: through a written questionnaire distributed to 16 fourth-year students, and through the semi-structured individual interviews.

All of these participants began their job-hunting process after April 2015, and the job interviews were conducted from August through November 2015. The questionnaires and interviews were conducted in November 2015, so many still had a clear and fresh memory of what they had experienced. Moreover, some respondents had kept a written record of their job-hunting process. The taking of notes on previous application processes is advised by university career centers as a means of assisting students' job-hunting process. Consequently, clear and sufficient data was collected.

## 4 . Results

### 4.1 Questionnaire

Questionnaire content is as follows, with students' replies summarized in a table below each question:

Q1. How many companies did you apply to? (Table 1)

Table 1. Number of companies applied to by respondents

Number of applications made	Number of respondents
1 - 10	4
11 - 20	6
21 - 30	3
31 - 40	2
More than 41	1

As Table 1 indicates, four respondents applied to between 1 and 10 companies, six applied to between 11 and 20, three applied to between 21 and 30, two applied to between 31 and 40, and 1 respondent applied to more than 41. Regarding their prospective employers, the following questions were asked.

Q2. How many companies asked you to inform them of your level of English proficiency at the entry stage? (Table 2) If a particular level was required, please indicate the level.

Table 2. Number of companies that asked about English proficiency

<b>Number of companies asking English level</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
All	4
Approximately half	5
Approximately a quarter	6
None	1

As shown in Table 2, four respondents replied that all the companies they applied to asked to indicate their English proficiency at the application level. Five said approximately half of companies asked and six stated about a quarter. Only one respondent stated that none of the companies she applied to asked her to inform them of her English proficiency. Of the companies that inquired about the applicants' English proficiency, some requested that the applicants provide their TOEIC scores. A smaller number inquired about STEP<sup>2</sup> test scores, experience of studying abroad, or specifically asked about the applicant's level of communication skill in English.

For a small number of companies, the next stage of the job-hunting process is a written English test. Accordingly, the following question was asked:

Q3. Were you required to take an English test conducted by one or more of the companies for which you had passed the first stage? (Table 3) If so, what kind of test?

Table 3. Number of respondents required to take an English test by companies to which they applied

<b>Number of respondents required to take an English test</b>	<b>Number of respondents not required to take an English test</b>
14	2

<sup>2</sup> The STEP test is known as "Eiken" among the Japanese and is one of the most common English tests of its kind for students from junior high school up to business people.



Out of 16 respondents, 14 answered they had been given an English written test by one or more of the companies for which they had passed the first stage. The tests included different factors ranging from high-school-level vocabulary and use of idioms, translation of a sentence or a company's philosophy, reading comprehension, or construction of a self-introduction. Respondents reported that these tests were rather easy, primarily seeking comprehension and execution of basic English fundamentals. Therefore, at this stage, even among companies who have made some form of inquiry into the applicant's English skills, an advanced level of English does not seem to be expected.

In the following stage, applicants who have passed the previous stages are requested to attend job interviews. The number of rounds of interviews conducted depends upon the company; some have only one and others can have as many as five. These can also be conducted in a group or individually. The following questionnaire content concerns whether applicants are asked about their English proficiency in interviews:

Q4. How many company interviews have you attended? (Table 4) In how many were you asked about your English proficiency? (Table 5)

Table 4. Number of companies with which respondents had job interviews

Number of companies respondents had interviews with	Number of respondents
1 - 10	5
11 - 20	8
21 - 30	2
31 - 40	1

Table 5. Number of companies that asked respondents about English proficiency

Number of companies that requested level of English proficiency	Number of respondents
All	None
Approximately half	8
Approximately a quarter	7
None	1

Not all companies inquired about applicants' English skills during job interviews. Half of respondents replied that about half of the companies with which they had interviews requested them to provide their English proficiency, and seven respondents (nearly half) answered that about one-quarter of the companies asked them to provide their level of English proficiency. When asked to describe the kinds of questions asked concerning English proficiency, respondents wrote that companies mostly inquire about TOEIC scores and experience of studying abroad. From the questionnaires, it can be concluded that not all companies require that applicants demonstrate proficiency in English (other than with TOEIC scores), but the companies that do ask about English skills judge skill level mostly through TOEIC scores, while other companies place value on applicants' experiences of studying abroad. Questions asked about studying abroad concerned what the applicants learned from their experience, how they coped with difficulties in a different culture, and how their opinions have changed as a result of their experience. It seems that these companies prefer human development to linguistic development.

#### ***4.2 Interviews***

In order to examine this information in greater detail, after conducting the questionnaire a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews were held in the researcher's office with 4 of the 16 students who had answered the questionnaire. These students, Aoyama, Beppu, Chikada, and Dazai<sup>3</sup>, have a high level of English proficiency (between high intermediate and advanced) relative to that of the average Japanese university student and have experience of studying abroad.

Interviews lasted approximately 25 to 30 minutes. They were recorded with the permission of participants and notes were taken that were later transcribed. In the interview, some planned questions were asked, but the latter part was kept open-ended. Fortunately, the interviews with these students provided useful and insightful information that could not be found through the written questionnaire. In particular, concerning students' actual job interviews, informants presented detailed information

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<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

on their perspectives of the English-language requirements of the companies they interviewed with and will be working for after graduation. The data gathered provided the following:

The first interviewee of this study, Aoyama has a job offer from a trading firm, and she previously spent one and a half years in the US on an ESL course. She has also obtained a high TOEIC score of 815. In the first round of her interview, Aoyama mentioned that she had studied for one year in California and one semester in Washington and that her TOEIC score had increased from 315 when entering university to her current score of 815. The job interviewer was curious about the role she had performed as a student ambassador when studying in California and asked her about her duties in this capacity. She explained that she had taken care of other international students and had helped the staff. This interview was conducted with a group of six people, and the other interviewees in the group did not have a high-level of English proficiency. In the next round of interviews, a group interview with two other applicants was conducted. Once again, Aoyama mentioned the increase in her TOEIC score and experience of studying abroad and also mentioned her part-time job. In the last interview, the final three applicants received job offers even though neither of the other two applicants had good English skills nor an interest in increasing these skills, a fact Aoyama discovered through a conversation with these other applicants. Therefore, Aoyama concluded that English skill was not required in the company. As the applicants were asked to write an essay in Japanese about what it would be like to work for the company, she felt the company was mainly examining if she could use appropriate Japanese and if she was enthusiastic about working for the company.

The second interviewee, Beppu succeeded in obtaining a job offer from a megabank after having five rounds of interviews. During the interviews, she emphasized the diligent study she had performed to achieve an increase of 300 points on the TOEIC test and that she had actively participated in many events and activities during her academic year spent studying in the US. Of the five rounds of interviews, the first round was a group interview with five applicants and the other rounds were individual. In the later interviews, higher staff members such as senior staff members were present. When she discussed her experience of attending many different activities in

the US and the increase in her TOEIC test scores, staff from the higher managerial positions seemed to be impressed but the younger interviewers did not. One of the younger interviewers mentioned that he had been working hard to improve his English and suggested that she could obtain at least 800 with a little more effort. From this conversation, she said she initially had the impression that the company would not value her TOEIC score unless she obtained at least 800. They appeared to have more of an interest in how she had coped with a different culture and handled difficulties during her study in the US. Overall, she believes that an English proficiency test score is one way of showing what she endeavored to learn and worked hard at during her university period.

The third interviewee, Chikada, is to commence working as a sales person for a trading company of electronic appliances. There were three rounds of interviews, with only the final round containing no other co-applicants. Throughout the first and second interviews, no questions about English skill were asked. During the third and the final round of her interview, she was asked whether she could speak conversational-level English and also what she had learned from her several experiences studying abroad, in both the US and Australia when she was in elementary school. The interviewers showed curiosity in asking her how these cross-cultural experiences had changed her, and she explained that, although she used to be very shy, she has since become outgoing and willing to take on leadership roles in many fields. After completing the interviews, she felt that the company did not value English skills as much as she had believed they would. Instead, they value personality and examine if the applicant has good communication skills as a sales person and if they can get along well with people. She concluded that applicants would not be disadvantaged by having good English but that it is not as highly valued as the public currently believe and it is not valued sufficiently for her proficiency to greatly impress employers.

The last interviewee, Dazai, is to commence work with an airline company. This field of business is naturally thought to require strong English skills. However, no English language-related questions were asked during the three rounds of interviews. Dazai also purposely chose not to mention her English skills in these interviews. She wrote her TOEIC score on her application form and believed that the form would

sufficiently show her English proficiency. In the first and second interviews, which were conducted in a group, she was asked about what she endeavored to achieve and what she worked hard at. She talked about *kendo*, the Japanese art of fencing, which she has been practicing since she was an elementary-school child. The other applicants discussed what they had learned from their studies abroad. When the job-hunting process was completed, she says she was asked to submit her TOEIC score. (Often, whether the interviewers asked applicants about their English skill depended upon whether they wrote about these skills on the entry sheet or whether they proactively stated that they wanted to discuss it as an asset). She mentioned that for this airline company, although it is not publicized, a TOEIC score of 500 is likely the minimum requirement because her friends who did not meet this score failed to pass the first entry phase. After prospective employees were asked to attend an official ceremony in October, all were asked to submit their TOEIC score and asked to inform the company if they could obtain a higher score before the commencement of their post, which will be on April 1, 2016. In Dazai's case, she had a score of 760, so no further action is required.

Thus, four participants of this pilot study are going to enter different industry sectors. Except for Dazai, who is going to work in an airline company, the rest of the participants did not feel that English was valued highly in the interview process. Rather, participants felt that, during interviews, companies had observed personality traits; for example, in Aoyama's case, appropriate use of Japanese and enthusiasm about working for the company, for Beppu, how she had coped with a different culture and handled difficulties, for Chikada, how cross-cultural experiences have shaped her personality and communication skills as a sales person, and for Dazai, what she endeavored to achieve and at what she worked at hardest. Thus, the job applicants perceived that they had not been observed primarily for English proficiency but rather so the employers could understand their personal attributes.

## 5 . Conclusion

This research was conducted to ascertain the requisite English skills for university students who are beginning to seek employment. Currently in Japan, there is an emphasis on having a degree of English ability and on the importance of training globally minded students with strong English skills. In this pilot study, two surveys were conducted with university students who were seeking jobs after they graduate: one was a questionnaire with 16 participants and the other a semi-structured individual interview with four participants. The aim of these investigations was to attend to two questions: to what degree do the students regard English as a skill that is valued in the job-hunting process, and what do they believe is valued by their prospective employers.

From the first survey, it was revealed that some companies do not inquire about applicants' English skills at the entry stage or during job interviews. When companies do ask questions about English, they inquire about TOEIC scores as being representative of English skills, and about experiences studying abroad.

In the second survey, interview participants stated that they received the impression that the companies they interviewed at did not greatly value English proficiency because they did not ask specifically about English skills unless the students mentioned it voluntarily. Rather, the interviewers showed more interest in what the students had learned from studying abroad and how they had coped with difficulties in different cultures, and were more curious to learn about applicants' personal growth than linguistic development.

The perspectives of these students show that English proficiency is not highly regarded, or at least questions to this effect were not asked as frequently as they had originally expected. Rather, English proficiency can be just one of several tools to show efforts made during university years. In addition, mentioning English proficiency could be used as a "cue" or "foothold" to continue the conversation and provide material for further questions during the interview.

This research is on a small scale, with a limited number of participants. The scope of

this study was to explore students' experiences of participating in job-interviews and their perceptions of the value of English. As a result, there may be differences in the valuation of English proficiency depending on the business or job category, as well as information gained through interviewing the prospective companies to which study participants applied, and it could therefore be considered hasty to make sweeping conclusions from the results of this study. Companies which seek applicants with English proficiency could have higher expectations in terms of TOEIC scores and as one interview respondent mentioned, a TOEIC score that might be considered unimpressive by interviewers would not be worth mentioning, whereas a higher score could be used as a strength or as a tool to continue the conversation. Further research might explore what score would be regarded high enough to demonstrate a student's strength in the job-hunting process. In order to ascertain in greater detail the requisite English proficiency for job-seeking university students, a larger scale study should be conducted. This would greatly help in designing an English language university curriculum in the future especially for would-be globally minded professionals.

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